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ABSTRACT

Older adults attend continuing education courses for a variety of reasons. Some, like Wuschko K., seek to make sense of their early life experiences. Wuschko is a Polish immigrant who wanted to go on with his education in early life but was prevented from doing so by poverty and war. He spent years in a concentration camp, then became a carpenter and immigrated to the United States. He sees education as a life review and pursues it for self-esteem and the pleasure of learning. Others, such as Jenny M., a black widow in her 60s, pursue education as a means of getting a new job. Jenny had an opportunity to go to college when whe was young, but rebelled against her parents and married instead. Jenny insists she has no regrets about her decision, but is now continuing her education in order to learn more about working with retarded toddlers. She is looking to the future and learning for practical rather than philosophical reasons. These two persons are illustrative of the myriad personalities of the older persons who continue their educations. Their motives vary, and all must be respected by adult educators. Methods of research on motivation must include data that tap the most personal levels of history and psychology. Such methods must be qualitative and allow for in-depth answers. Finally, it is also important that adult educators do not isolate the older adult through a "they-out-there" versus "we-in-here" approach, but respond to individual needs with respect. (KC)

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MOTIVATION IN LATE LIFE:

THE PERSONAL NEED FOR CHALLENGE

by

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A recent newspaper article read:

STUDENT, 79, GOES TO YALE

New Haven, Conn. (UPI)--A retired postal official who had to choose work over college almost 60 years ago has become the oldest student ever enrolled at Yale University. John E. Armstrong, 79, is working toward a bachelor of liberal studies degree under a special Yale program.

QUESTION: What made Mr. Armstrong do it?

ANSWER: Somewhere in his personal motivational construct is the key to Mr. Armstrong's current pursuit of learning.

Motivation: A Lifespan View

For adult educators, and for gerontologists, Mr. Armstrong's act cries out for analysis, explication and, to a varying extent, hope. Adult educators are relieved and excited to hear of one more individual who demonstrates that old age is not a time of decline in intellect nor of motivation for learning. The potential for education in late life ignites sparks in the hearts of many mid-life educators who forsee more and more classrooms of older adults. Indeed, the prospect is personally satisfying: educators see their own values affirmed. Late life can be a time for self-actualization through education.

It is possible that greater numbers of elders will attend classes. Indeed, current demographics tell us that the average fifty-year old in 1982 can expect to live twenty-nine more years. And the average eighty-five-year old can expect to live six and a half more years! (Monthly Vital Statistics Report, 1984). In five years thirteen percent of all Americans will be the projected over-sixty-five population. And in the year 2030 twenty-one percent of the population will be over sixty-five (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1984, p. 73).

However, motivation for participation in classroom learning is still an elusive key to understanding why older individuals choose to spend their energy in adult education programs. Indeed, Houle's (1961) work remains a cornerstone of explication. A complex personal construct is responsible for motivation in each individual. Older people are especially individual, having had more years to become so. While some cohort (generational) generalizations can be made, each learner is fundamentally separate: and these individual differences are lifelong personality traits. How can educators begin to look at these highly personal motivational characteristics which move humans to achieve, dare (risk or not risk)?

One way to focus on adult learners' motivation is to explore, through phenomenological research, how their worlds are constructed, and, in particular, to ask what events or environments of their early lives have helped to shape their current process. The following section focuses on the words of two participants in a recent research study (Wolf, 1982).

Case Histories

While it is heartening to know that no two lives are alike, it is possible to say that at some level, many lives are alike. The individuals presented here, Wuschko K. and Jenny M., have diverse goals in adult education. While the themes discussed are personal, they are also historical, pointing out lifelong motives that lead to specific activities in late adulthood. At first glance the only common factor in the stories is participation in an adult education program in one particular semester, common patterns of social force and human experience emerge which illuminate a larger shared reality. The themes of social class, thwarted educational dreams, sex roles and historical pressures tie the individuals into a broad and interconnected pattern.

Wuschko K.

Wuschko K. is a 67-year old Polish immigrant now attending continuing education classes. In Poland, Wuschko attended elementary and some secondary school or vocational training in agricultural methods. As education beyond the elementary level had to be paid for by the student's family and Wuschko's family did not have much money, "education" was a dream and not a practical choice. He says:

> The high school has to be paid already at the beginning of grade school in Poland, or there could be no more. So, if people with small means like my father--well, especially, I thought of attending perhaps higher school. But then the Depression came and the product that my father produced on the farm fell down badly so there was no talk of going to any higher than what I got.

While Wuschko did manage to attend an agricultural training school in another village about 25 miles from his home, the Depression did away with any further chance for higher education.

> When the Depression came, I abandoned the thoughts completely. . .That was 1932, '33. I learned a trade; I learned carpentry.

"Career planning" was unknown 50 years ago. Few of our elders had the economic option of developing a dream that could be fulfilled through education. (This is particularly true of women whose option was to marry or not to marry.) Work, then, was a certainty. One went to school as long as possible and then took a job or an apprenticeship that led to a job--and that was how careers took shape. Wuschko found what oppportunity he could and he stayed close to his family's home.

He described the years of apprenticeship and work with fondness. He worked as a carpenter until, at age 26, he joined the Polish army. After serving briefly, he was captured in 1939 by the Germans and interned at Buchenwald; after five years at Buchenwald, he was transferred to Dachau Concentration Camp. Liberated by American troops in 1947 (weighing 75 pounds and dying of typhoid), Wuschko never returned to Poland.

When asked to explain his current motivation for participation in learning activities at age 67, Wuschko recalled his war-time experiences. One purpose, he says, is to understand the evil he knew:

> They tried to kill mind and body. This was purpose. They put us in groups and we were going to quarries and we were moving stones from one end of the pit to the other end of the pit and back again. For no reason. And this is demoralizing, destroying spirit. Sometimes we had no gloves, well, after a while it takes skin off your fingers from the stone. Try to wrap in something. Those who did this job for a long time, they didn't survive.

In the concentration camp and afterward, Wuschko learned to read and speak both German and English:

> I started when I was prisoner of war in Germany. And I had another friend and we were meeting. He was also made to work in Germany and he supplied us with material; he brought us text books, German-English text books. That's where I began. It started with Charles Dickens story, The Christmas Carol.

After time in an Italian hospital and five years in England where he waited for entry into the U.S., Wushcko immigrated. Since then the years have been difficult. He has worked as a carpenter and as a janitor. He says he never lost his dream of pursuing a education. Now semi-retired, he has begun to work toward a college degree (not unlike our Mr. Armstrong). He says it will be a symbol of personal achievement. Moreover, learning is "a great privilege":

> I would like to move my intellect to a higher plane. I would like to understand life itself better--why people act as they do; what motivates some people to do so much evil to others . . .There are some other objectives: to grasp the meaning of life and its beauty, to be able to walk in the company of philosophers, poets and saints just for a little while.

What motivates this man? In Maslow's (1968) terms, Wuschko exemplifies the pursuit of self-esteem and of self-actualization. Surely he has chosen a route to achievement of the most personal of goals. In Erikson's (1963) sense of stages Wuschko must be working at Stage 8: "integrity vs. despair." In this last stage of life, writes Erikson, a harvest of values occurs.

> It is a post-narcissistic love of the human ego--not of the self--as an experience which conveys some world order and spiritual sense, no matter how dealy paid for. It is the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions. (p. 268)

Indeed, Wuschko himself echoes Erikson when he says, "Study is a kind of happiness pursuit in the spiritual domain." Clearly, Wuschko's motivation is inextricably tied to emotion, perhaps the life review that Butler (1963) states is "universal and normative" in the last stage of life.

Jenny M.

Jenny M. is a 61-year-old black woman who has been widowed for five years. She is experiencing new beginnings. She recently moved to a small northeastern city from her home in another state; it is the same city she had lived in as a young woman. She has a job which began as a quasi-volunteer experience (there is a small stipend) but may become a new career. She is a Foster Grandparent.

Jenny was born in N--- City in 1919 and moved to S--- when she was "at a pretty young age." She says, "My father had established a law practice here and stayed here. I can't figure out why." Jenny's parents were both professionals: her father a lawyer and her mother a teacher before marrying and taking on the housewife's role. Her home was strict and she developed a life-long habit of obstinant behavior. She says she began early to "buck" her parents' authority.

> Can I tell you something? I am the worst person in the world for someone to say "no" to. Honest to goodness! And my daughter, she'll tell anybody, "Don't ever tell my mother not to do something. That's when she's going to do it." She knows it; it's a known fact. And i don't know where I get that stubbornness from!

School life was always pleasant for Jenny. She attended the local elementary and secondary schools and praises her early teachers:

> When I went to school the teachers were dedicated. We had to stay after school. Nowadays the teachers leave the same time the pupils leave. I don't know, they're not as dedicated as they used to be; they are only out for the money, I do believe.

She felt some pressure to go on to school, particularly from her father. However, she didn't like to follow his advice and has always been rather satisfied with herself.

> I didn't care about going to college, I really didn't. And the funny thing about it, I never regretted that decision. Like some girls say, "If I only had the chance you did! Why didn't you do it?"
>
> I did not like that type of study. My father, I think, was trying to get me to go to college but I didn't want to go. . .He had me all set to go

> to C--- Normal School. . .I bucked it at the last minute. I didn't want to do it.. .Finally my father was disgusted with me. . .But, as I say, I have no regrets.

All of Jenny's life choices display her obstinancy. She chose to marry a man her father disapproved of:

> Ha, ha. I went with him--it was a disaster. But it was one of those things that my father throught I was marrying beneath me. . .But, when he said he wanted to marry me, my father put his foot down. . .he disowned me.. .I think if he had said to me, "Now I will give you the biggest wedding in the world," I wouldn't have married him.

Jenny's life has been good, although a struggle economically. She worked as a dry cleaner and eventually owned a small shop with her husband. When her husband died five years ago she was lost. Now, for the first time there was no father to react against nor a husband to depend on. Finally, she returned to the city where she had been raised, moved into a building made up of federally subsidized apartments for the elderly, and began a series of experiments in living as an older person. This is a common pattern for the transitional woman and school often becomes a part of the new life.

Jenny rebelled again when she found herself among women in similar circumstances. She did not identify with her cohort:

By living here, I've been here since the building opened. . .and I haven't come into contact with a heck of a lot of elderly women that do things. They feel that once they have reached the social security stage, that all they're supposed to do is sit down and do nothering.. .Three o'clock to five o'clock they're sitting downstairs. . .One time I was down there one afternoon and they were talking about their pains and their aches, and theri pills and what the doctor says and other people. I felt like I was sick when I came upstairs. . They've all worked but I guess they feel that they sould take it easy. But what they're doing is deteriorating.

I've just been fussing about after a woman turns 50 and she's widowed there's nothing for her to do. Sitting around and feeling sorry for herself. . .I broke myself or that right quick. I volunteered. I'd do a thousand hours at the hospital volunteering. I had to do something because I'm not a person to sit around. And that started me off.

Jenny volunteers in the hospital, directs the building food sales and church bazaar, serves as an officer in the Urban League and finally, developed a new vocational direction. She is a Foster Grandparent and her assignment is in a day-care center for severely retarded toddlers. She began by donating several hours a week and has increased her time and her small salary. This led her to a workshop in nutrition for children and then to courses at a local community college. She expects to gain some practical strategies for working with retarded toddlers.

Jenny's motivation--again, purely individual--can represent a different set of circumstances and direction in adult education. She does not seek to integrate her history into a large picture, nor to review her past. She is more of the transitional woman who seeks new direction and a vocational experience. Gutmann (1975) has focused his research and theory on sex role differentiation. His thesis is that ego mastery styles (active, passive and magical) vary for men and women at different ages,, perhaps due to social sex roles. Older women often adopt active, assertive life styles after their children have grown or after they are widowed (Gutmann, 1975; Neugarten & Gutmann, 1968). Similarly, Lowenthal, Thurnher and Chiriboga (1975) found that "empty nest" women were finding new direction in late middle age. It is a good time for a new career and Jenny is embarking in that direction.

Conclusion and Caveat Emptor

Clearly, growing old is different for all people. The two case studies above represent individuals who attend adult and continuing education classes in the same small Northeastern city. One looks forward; the other looks back. One attempts to "put together the bits and pieces of life," the other wants a job. Their motivations for learning are so personal as to defy quantification and classification. Any research or discussion of motivation must include data which tap the most personal levels of history and psychology. Such methods must be qualitative and allow for in-depth answers (Rakowski, 1984-85) and a qualitative approach (Seidman, Sullivan Schatzkamer, 1983). Finally, it is also important that adult educators do not isolate the older adult through a "they-out-there" vs. "we-in-here" approach (Datan, 1984). Such an attitude would surely create a stereotypical and ageist approach to a well-meaning profession which seeks to upgrade programming and opportunities for the elderly.

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